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SUBJECT: NRW STATE MINISTER EXPLAINS GERMANY'S INTEGRATION CHALLENGE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: North Rhine-Westphalia's (NRW) Minister for Generations, Women, Families and Integration Armin Laschet told the Ambassador and Dusseldorf CG November 18 that Germany has a multi-faceted integration problem that must be immediately addressed. The Minister noted Germany's long-time reluctance to define itself as an immigrant country and discussed how NRW is trying to address integration issues. Germany's challenge is singular, Laschet said, it must now "catch up" on integration, after having denied for decades that the issue even existed, and at the same time pursue a new influx of educated immigrants as Germany's population ages and shrinks. End summary.

#### Germany's Fifty-Year Immigration History

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¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador asked for Laschet's views on two key issues-Germany's shrinking demographics and efforts to integrate existing immigrants. Laschet came into office in 2005 following the victory of current NRW Minister-President J|rgen R|ttgers (CDU) as the only state minister in Germany with a portfolio that includes integration. Laschet described integration as a relatively new topic in German society, particularly for his party, the CDU, despite a fifty-year post-WWII history. Immigration to Germany, he said, began in 1955 with Italian and other Southern European immigrants. Turks came starting in 1961 -- as so-called guest workers, not migrants - following the signing of an agreement between the FRG and Turkey. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Germany received 300,000 to 400,000 asylum seekers per year, thanks to a liberal asylum law. After the asylum law was tightened in 1993, the numbers dropped drastically to 30,000 to 40,000 annually. Germany passed its first immigration law in 2005, which allows highly skilled workers to immigrate to Germany. In 2005, just 600 people came under that income-based system. The conundrum is, Laschet noted, that while many Germans believe that there is a large flow of immigrants to the country, the truth is, it has slowed to a trickle, not nearly enough to help with the country's shrinking population and need for skilled and educated labor. NRW alone, he said, currently needs at least 6,000 engineers.

#### Two Major Problems: Demographics and Integration

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¶3. (SBU) Two major integration-related issues with which Germany must contend are (1) increasing the relatively low number of skilled immigrants, and (2) integrating those immigrants already in Germany. The first is a national policy issue, and Laschet emphasized that there is no choice but to increase the number of skilled immigrants since highly skilled workers like engineers

and nurses continue to leave the country. In 2008, for the first time, more people left Germany than immigrated to the country.

14. (SBU) The second problem, the integration of immigrants who have lived in Germany for years, he referred to as "catch-up" integration. According to Laschet, even as it became clear that the "guest workers" were here to stay, the German establishment put its head in the sand, not encouraging integration nor German language education. While the CDU ignored the problem, the Social Democrats (SPD), per Laschet, thought it would not be right, given Germany's history, to "force" the children of immigrants to learn German. Now everyone is playing catch-up, particularly in NRW, he said. The figures here are striking, he said: some 38% of the children in NRW have a migrant background; in urban areas, as much as 50%. The majority have Turkish migrant backgrounds.

#### Education as a Solution to Integration

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15. (SBU) Laschet cited then-Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble's 2006 affirmation that "Islam is part of German society" as the real starting point for integration. NRW, Laschet explained, is pushing ahead with Islamic instruction in the public schools. He confirmed that they will shift from government-defined to religious community-defined Islamic lessons in public schools, beginning with the 2010 school year. He was optimistic that this change will assist with efforts to integrate the Muslim population. At the same time, some 24% of four-year old children in NRW -- many of immigrant background,

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but by no means all - do not speak German at the mandated level, according to Laschet. They are now being tested at four years of age, and those who do not speak adequate German receive two years of language assistance in pre-school, preparing them to enter elementary school on a level playing field with other children. The hope is that this will eventually sharply reduce the number of immigrant children who fall behind or cannot qualify for a high quality secondary and post-secondary education. A more far-reaching reform of the education system is coming, Laschet explained; both the CDU and the SPD in NRW have education reform plans in their election platforms for the upcoming May 2010 state parliament elections.

16. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.  
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